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Viewpoints

Casey's assault on Libya leaks
best aimed at Administration

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IDON'T usually work up a sweat defending the honor of *The Washington Post*. That rich, fat paper has a Murderer's Row of legal hired guns to handle its feuds.

Same thing for *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Times*. All of those folks have six-figure lawyers to do their heavy lifting.

But when CIA Director Bill Casey talks about throwing newspapermen in jail, he's got my attention.

I'm not sure who Casey has in mind for the hoosegow — *Post* publisher Katherine Graham, editor Ben Bradlee, or one-time reporter Bob Woodward. Hard to tell because when Casey gets mad, his jowls shake and he stammers like a hot Model-T Ford.

But Casey's threatening to invoke a 1950s secrecy law that could cost somebody \$10,000 and 10 years in the slammer.

Like the President he serves, Casey blows his stack about officials spilling secrets and reporters printing them. If Ron and Bill had their druthers, the town would have a lie detector behind every file cabinet.

But Casey's attempt to pin a rap on *The Post* and four other news outfits is laughable.

"We've already got five absolutely cold violations," Casey told *The Post's* editors.

The way I understand it, Casey and the President are burned because *The Post* and others spilled the beans that the United States has been "reading Khadafy's mail." Precisely, they're mad because reporters wrote that U.S. code-breakers intercepted cables between Moammar Khadafy's headquarters and the Libyan "People's Bureau" in East Germany before the Berlin disco bombing.

Casey's right. Somebody blabbed about those cable intercepts. And he doesn't have to look far to collar the blabbers.

They include the President, his NATO general, his ambassador to West Germany, and assorted other U.S. officials.

The leakers were at the top. In truth, the U.S. Government, trying to build support for its Libyan air strike, took the extraordinary gamble of disclosing intelligence picked up by National Security Agency (NSA) experts who broke Khadafy's diplomatic codes.

Ronald Reagan himself was the Chief Leaker. In his April 15 televised speech, he gave chapter and verse from the radio intercepts: "On March 25 . . . orders were sent from Tripoli . . . to conduct the terrorist attack. . . . On April 4, the People's Bureau alerted Tripoli the attack would be carried out. . . . Our evidence is direct. It is precise. It is irrefutable."

Where would the Libyans think Reagan got his evidence — off postcards?

But Reagan had many Associate Leakers in this high-level game:

Gen. George Rogers, NATO commander, said on the record earlier that the United States had evidence of the disco attack but was "15 minutes too late."

Richard Burt, the publicity-fond ambassador to West Germany, bragged on the *Today* show that the United States had proof nailing the Libyan bombers.

Versions of the NSA cable intercepts were circulated on Capitol Hill; they were also trotted around European capitals by U.N. Ambassador Vernon Walters. In short, the newsmen Casey's so hot to jail were publishing leaks premeditated by the Reagan Administration to sell its bombing raid.

Reagan spokesman Larry Speakes told reporters the President had "declassified" the Libyan intercepts in his TV speech — "had he not declassified it, first question you'd have asked would have been, 'Where's the proof?'"

Casey knows critics in the intelligence community think he and the President made an expensive bargain by tipping the U.S. code-busting ability. But it's fatuous to blow off steam by blaming the press.

It's an old story for this Administration — so hypersensitive to secrecy and in love with polygraphs — to selectively spread classified dope that serves its purposes. The farce started in 1981 when the Reagan crew leaked evidence Libyan "hit squads" were coming to assassinate U.S. leaders.

Presidential fury at leakers is also an old story. Remember why Richard Nixon created the "plumbers"? But the Reagan team wants the game both ways. It leaks to suit its own needs. Then it fires a Pentagon underling who leaks its plans to give Stinger missiles to Afghan rebels.

Well, *The Post* can take care of itself. But Casey's ridiculous when he raves about prosecuting newsmen under a dusty law (U.S. 798) for disclosing classified information.

If he wants a culprit, let Casey knock on the door of the Oval Office.

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Casey of the CIA: Accuses media of violations